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ABSTRACT

This paper advises teachers of technical writing to "practice what they preach" by occasionally doing field work in technical communication. The possibilities for off-campus work include consultation, perhaps for an in-house manual of technical writing procedures and skills, editing assignments for businesses and public agencies, and freelance writing for technical rather than scholarly publications. Such nonacademic work enables technical-writing teachers to expose more people to the value of technical-writing skills, to put classroom theory into practice, and to modify theory with on-the-job experience. Technical-writing instructors, in effect, become better teachers by becoming better practitioners of their subject. (RL)

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WHAT CONSULTATION AND FREELANCE WRITING CAN DO FOR YOU AND FOR YOUR STUDENTS

I'm recommending that teachers of technical writing get off their campus and into the offices and shops in which technical communication is practiced. If the idea of leaving your students and books for the world of hardware, deadlines, public relations, and profit statements shocks you, I apologize. Of course, if you were teachers of 17th century poetry, I would not be surprised to find you in the library getting close to your material. I submit, therefore, that as teachers of technical communication you have no less an obligation to your craft than other teachers have to theirs--perhaps more.

Technical communication is, after all, a necessary lubricant in our technological system, the system which sustains our civilization. For those who affect disdain for technology, I note that smallpox has been eradicated from the face of the earth, that food production per acre has been increasing for years, and that the lastest tests of the Enterprise, a re-usable space vehicle, were completely successful. The metaphor of technical communication as lubricant extends, since as our system becomes more complex and active, technical communication becomes more essential. As a technical writer and consultant for a number of major corporations I am very sensitive to this trend.

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A typical example can be found at Northwest Pipeline Corporation in Salt Lake City, Utah. Until recently Northwest compressor stations along their natural gas pipelines were operated and maintained by on-site crews who received instructions, read gauges, and turned valves. This mode of operation no longer does the job. Recent demands on the pipeline for greater amounts of delivered natural gas energy at the lowest possible cost forced Northwest to develop more efficient compressor stations. Now all start-up and shut-down sequences and schedules are controlled by Datamaster INDEX 4000 Remote Terminal Units connected by land line to a central control station in Salt Lake City.

Previously unnecessary, operation and maintenance manuals were now required for several reasons. In the first place, the particular control system designed by Northwest engineers was unique to the industry. Wholly automatic systems exist, but a successful attempt to automate previously manually operated equipment had never been made. Some uniform, reliable means of explaining this new system to the technicians who would be responsible for its day-to-day operation had to be devised. To complicate matters, technicians would no longer live with the equipment at one particular site. Instead, they would visit compressor stations only when a component failure or malfunction was reported by the monitoring computer.

Also, considering the cost and complexity of the new system, the good ol' boy, watch-how-I-do-it method of training would no longer do. The good ol' boy couldn't be there all the time anyway,

but the manual could and the manual is neither falable nor mortal. As an old friend of mine once pointed out, if the only elephant hunter in the tribe gets run over by an elephant, the tribe has to re-invent techniques of elephant hunting at some cost and effort. At Northwest, operation and maintenance techniques are now safely recorded in several hundred copies of a manual which is not only storable, transportable, and retrievable, but very marketable.

In this context, "consultation and freelance writing" includes three basic areas: teaching, editing, and writing. Teaching takes many forms, but however large the group, or wherever the exchange takes place, it involves giving advice intended to solve problems in technical communication. Anytime you give how-to advice to someone, you are teaching, and off-campus that's what we call consultation.

Editing can be a mix of teaching and writing. The proportions of the mix depend upon how much you explain what you are doing so someone else can do it. A typical editing job could be found, for example, at a National Forest Headquarters where Environmental Impact Statements and Land Use Plans are written by a team of experts. These teams typically consist of one each expert in soil, water, air, wildlife range management, and so forth. For all the reasons you might imagine, an editor is often called in rather late in the production schedule. The editor is asked to organize, illustrate, and reduce the size of a collection of reports written by foresters who would rather be counting moose and stamping out red ring rot. Occasionally, this editing task

develops into extended training sessions in which the purpose of the EIS is explored and the original collection of reports is completely rewritten to the agreed upon point.

Writing includes, by definition, basic research of some complexity, original composition, and often rewriting in response to directives from management. An excellent example of this delightful business is the writing of the operator's manual for Northwest Pipeline's INDEX 4000 data acquisition and control system. One man designed the interface between Datamaster's computers and Northwest's compressor equipment. The writer's job is to gather all the available information, and translate and organize it so that it is usefully available to a relatively inexperienced operator. The job can be more difficult than the mere translation of flow-charts and diagrams into instructions and directions if, for example, the new equipment displaces the very people from whom the writer must elicit the information. As you can imagine, a number of rhetorical complications can and do develop.

Finally, this last category includes the research and writing of original technical articles, either descriptive or instructive, for sale to technically oriented publication such as Road and Track, Bread Baker's Quarterly and Mechanics Illustrated. Mechanics Illustrated might not be PMLA, and your chairman might make that point, but a few technical articles sold and published will make you more of a teacher of technical writing than a hundred

articles printed in journals which exist only to print scholarly articles written for scholarly journals.

Why do I recommend that the teacher of technical communication practice technical communication? Because if you assume the role of a teacher, however that role is defined, then you should make it your business to find out what it is you are teaching your students to do. The assumption here is, of course, that there is more to the task of teaching than reading a text one page ahead of your students, or more even than reading bits of a number of different texts to your students. A course in technical communication is a skills course; that is, the teacher trains the students to accomplish clearly defined tasks in a standard, predictable and useful way. By working in their world, you will discover their needs, develop tested methods of solving real problems, and earn both respect and credibility.

I have great sympathy for the teacher who has never practiced the craft he teaches. How can he know what to do next? Why, he takes someone's word for it. Hopefully, he reads some text. But however good the text, it cannot duplicate the experience of working in the local market, the very market in which most of his students will compete. Consultation makes the teacher familiar with exactly the problems the students need to have solved for them. Classroom decisions, both rhetorical and pedagogical, can be based on the latest information and local conditions, rather than taken from a text designed to speak to the most general circumstances and the widest possible audience.

Every assignment you accept off-campus does for you what library research does for your 17th century colleagues. You become more broadly educated in science and technology, not any expert perhaps, but certainly a more competent generalist. You certainly become a more expert inter-disciplinary translator and communicator and that is what you are about in the classroom.

For all these reasons and more, consultation is also excellent experience for the English graduate student who now faces a shortage of jobs teaching literature at the university level, often the only position for which he is professionally and psychologically prepared. The writing program at the University of Utah, of which I am Director, is not an unusual program. It is a university support program in composition and advanced expository writing in which 95% of the teachers are English graduate students. Naturally, they haven't any clear idea of what technical writing might be. It worries them for several reasons, and in many cases their concern is evidenced by contempt.

Few English majors are aware of the number of things they can do with the skills they have in expository writing. A bit of work off-campus can show them a market for their skills which is seldom mentioned by the English faculty. If these students are no longer capable of doing anything less scholarly or esoteric than counting vowels in Beowulf, that is a tragedy indeed, but if they are willing to offer their services on the open market, they will discover a demand for English majors who can teach, edit, or write technical exposition. The first consultation job does

wonderful things for the morale of a graduate student. The first paycheck as a consultant, the knowledge of job well done, puts years of effete scorn in a proper perspective. Moreover, the English graduate student is thereby better prepared for the academic job market. He has some 'real' experience and is more confident of his worth as a teacher, writer, and human being. In fact, one of the problems I have had at Utah is keeping graduate students with consultation experience in the PhD program. They tend to get jobs and leave.

This new self-confidence coupled with a familiarity with technical material greatly improves the attitude of the young teacher towards technical subjects and students. It is not unusual for an English graduate student to hold his business and technical students in mild disdain because there is occasionally a mutual lack of respect between those who build bridges and those who build sentences. Productive contact between members of these two groups goes a long way towards a relaxation of such tensions.

On yet another level, the university itself benefits from the increased activity and visibility of faculty members working in the productive segments of the community. Our department, and perhaps yours, is experiencing increased pressure to answer to the people for the large sums of money that are annually consumed in the name of liberal education. We all know that humanistic studies are vital to whatever is best in this society, but we should also realize that to most of the taxpayers the product of the College of Humanities is as invisible as the Emperor's New

Clothes. As we approach the 1980's, fewer citizens than ever are willing to take our word that the old fellow isn't stark naked. We do many things for the community in which we live, study, and teach. It wouldn't hurt us a bit to do something that people can see, understand, and appreciate.

There is one final advantage which accrues to the entire system. Out in the field, we can test our genius against public and publicly defined measures of success. We can make of the world of work a laboratory in which to answer questions such as "What needs be done?" and "Does this procedure produce results?" Cloistered in the classroom we tend to consider not these more productive questions, but questions of fad, fashion, and worse.

Using the laboratory available to us, we, because we are teachers and researchers, can test our theories and thus move pragmatically toward a rhetoric of technical communication. We can start to show evidence, to demonstrate in the Aristotelian sense, of what is worth doing in the field of practical technical communication.

Finding consultation opportunities is a fairly easy thing to do. Much work goes begging in government and in industry. If you want evidence of the need for your services out there where the communication is being attempted, read some of the stuff they produce. You must, however, make a positive effort to open negotiations. Remember that people don't like to admit that they can't write very well, although they will admit that the other fellow doesn't. Keep in mind that most people don't especially

like to talk to English teachers. They remember the scorn of their ninth grade teacher and the confusion of freshman composition. You should offer to help rather than to evaluate.

I suggest that you join the Society for Technical Communication and attend the local meetings where you can meet the people who write for a living. Show them that you want to learn, and they will admit that they could use a little help. After all, what writer doesn't feel he could do better, or that his job should be easier. Ask the writers if you can visit their shops and observe the process of production writing. Bring some of your better behaved students along, if possible.

Visit local training officers and personnel managers. Go to meetings of the American Society of Training and Development. Ask how you can better prepare your technical and business students for the work that awaits them. Write to major industrial firms in your area and tell them that you need advice. Don't be threatening; ask for their help, and they will ask for yours.

Now that you know one more way to become rich and famous as teachers of technical communication, I will reveal the humanistic snake in the technological grass. I worry about the "engineer's solution" that ignores the consequences of that solution except as another engineer's problem. I also worry about the vulnerability of technology to populist attack. The technicians, engineers, scientists, and managers of our system, upon which we are all dependent, like it or not, need some humanistic advice about communication. If we can teach them that success is in large

part dependent upon their ability to communicate, that communication presupposes an audience, and that the audience must be considered, then we have taught them a useful and marvelous lesson in humanistic rhetoric, and our world will be the better for that.